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ATOFINA fire blamed on old pipe

Feds cite company in Riverview over lack of inspections

By Jeff Plungis / News Washington Bureau

RIVERVIEW -- The National Transportation Safety Board pinpointed a worn-out filler pipe as the probable cause of a last year's massive chemical fire in Riverview.

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The blaze killed three workers and led to the evacuation of about 2,000 Downriver residents.

The safety board faulted ATOFINA Chemical Inc. for inadequate inspection and maintenance of the facilities it uses for loading and unloading train cars in Riverview.

Federal investigators said the three workers who died in the July 14 incident probably would have survived if they had been wearing protective hoods and breathing equipment.

The board said the company's safety procedures called for employees to detect the presence of methyl mercaptan by smell while the company required employees to don a scuba-like breathing apparatus for handling chlorine.

NTSB chairwoman Marion Blakey likened that practice to the use of canaries in coal mines. "It is not what I would consider a safe approach for human beings," Blakey said.

ATOFINA spokesman Paul Lipsitz said the company had already taken the specific steps outlined in the report. Everyone who enters the Riverview plant now must carry a personal breathing apparatus, he said.

"On our own, we've adopted many, many improvements to safety," Lipsitz said.

Riverview Mayor Tim Durand said the accident showed the city needed to improve its emergency notification system.

ATOFINA has helped pay for a new warning system, including a city AM radio station, a telephone system that can call 600 residents per minute and new emergency sirens.

"This was a terrible accident," Durand said. "We're trying to learn from it and make sure it doesn't happen again."

Riverview City Manager Jim Feudner said the company acted responsibly in the months following the fire, helping to train city firefighters and paying for early warning systems for many cities.

But the incident still weighs on the community. "It remains fresh here

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in Riverview," Feudner said.

The NTSB further said federal oversight of transfers of toxic chemicals had been ineffective and recommended the Department of Transportation develop new regulations.

The ATOFINA accident occurred early on the morning of July 14. The failed transfer pipe allowed the release of methyl mercaptan from a train car at 3:45 a.m.

The leak ignited at 4:09 a.m., sending a fireball 200 feet into the air. An hour later, local officials evacuated about 2,000 residents from Riverview, Trenton, Grosse Ile and Wyandote.

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